

November 3, 2003

www.csae.com

Helping Members Cope in a Knowledge-Dependent World

Every association executive would do well to consider these interesting statistics:

- 1 of every 4 employees could now be considered a “knowledge worker,” according to Statistics Canada. That’s up from 14% in 1971. More people than ever work in a profession or career where their success is dependent upon accessing, manipulating, analyzing and understanding information;
- the amount of information that they are having to cope with is becoming nothing less than stunning. According to a recent study out of the University of California (Berkeley,) we now produce as much new information every six months as was produced in the first 300,000 years of human existence;
- a study from N.H. based Concord Communications found that 83% of corporate information technology managers have seen staff “violently abuse computer equipment.”

One could argue that the last statistic comes about because much of the extra information that we have to deal with is spam and other detritus of the information age!

That being said, it seems clear that if we weave these statistics together, our world is becoming ever more information reliant – and perhaps members of our associations are feeling ill-equipped to cope with the transition to becoming a knowledge worker.

They need additional guidance and training on how to cope in a world that is becoming ever more knowledge dependent. They require specific guidance and assistance in dealing with the change that is occurring within every profession, job and career as a result of the emergence of a world in which information production, sharing and distribution has sped up to a dramatic degree.

That’s what associations need to continue to relentlessly focus upon as they examine issues of professional education, strategic direction and the nature of member services.

Assessing the impact

The pace of change within every profession and career is speeding up dramatically. Years ago, Futurist magazine observed that *“the pace of technical change is so fast now that we must be prepared for a man to change not only his job, but his entire skills, three or four times in a lifetime.”* Consider the impact another way – in a national government report, Australia’s Innovation Council Chairman, indicated in a study on future career trends that 65% of the children who are in pre-school today will work in jobs and careers that have yet to be defined.

If that is to be the reality, then associations must understand how the “information age” is changing the jobs and careers of its members. Associations must ensure that their members are properly prepared for ongoing change. A big part of this involves equipping members with the skills, capabilities and attitudes that will take them forward into the future. .

That’s why association executives should ensure that one of their priorities is equipping their members to be able to master the new realities of the information age, particularly when it comes to their career and professional skills, responsibilities and capabilities. This means ensuring that members are provided with the knowledge and expertise to deal with the reality of a faster rate of career evolution than we have ever seen before.

Let’s look at the impact that the information age may be having on the jobs and careers of your members:

- it speeds up the volume of knowledge the members are expected to master

All of the knowledge we have today will be but 1% of what we will have in 2050. It is estimated that medical knowledge is doubling every eight years, and that half of what students learn in their freshman year about science and technology is obsolete or revised by their senior year. Consider this – one professional estimate suggests that the half-life of an engineer's knowledge is about 5 years. Clearly, members of your associations are now expected to master more knowledge than ever before – and you must continue to play a key role in ongoing professional development.

- it speeds up the pace of research and development

This leads to an ever-increasing rate of change with the products and services the members of your associations are expected to provide, support and deliver. We now have, with the global connectivity that has emerged, a global petri-dish for knowledge exchange. This means that the pace of technological change now accelerates with each new discovery, leading to an ever-increasing pace of new development. The result? Constant innovation is critical in every industry and profession in order to stay in the game, and to keep up with what is going on. Product life cycles that use to last few years, might now last a year or two at best.

- it helps to foster greater competition in the marketplace

A faster rate of R&D, which results from increased global information sharing and better corporate intelligence, means that as products come to the market quicker, the very nature of competition in many an industry is heightened. This helps lead to the greater degree of structural, ongoing corporate change that we see around us today. As competition increases, organizations are forced to undertake bold new actions to retain market share. They must constantly attack their cost structure, seeking to squeeze out new efficiencies and cost savings. They relentlessly examine and pursue new external partnerships with the aim of outsourcing as many ongoing functions and responsibilities as they can.

- it changes the very nature of the professional or degree skills that many people possess, and leads to new day-to-day responsibilities

As new products and services come to market, the very nature of the day to day activities of your members will continue to undergo rapid change. The most fascinating thing is that it makes it impossible for anyone to cope with everything in a particular profession or skills area, with the result that we see an increased degree of specialization within what were once broad areas of knowledge.

For example, while in the past we had “human resource professionals” who could handle a wide variety of issues, the field of employee and career management has become far too complex for any one individual to manage on their own. The result is that today we have career counseling specialists, as well as people who focus on training and development, others who are specialists in corporate use of instructional technologies, and others who spend their time on issues of labor or industrial relations. Not to mention pension and group benefit managers, as well as career planning experts. One profession, many specialties.

So it is with accountants – today, we've got forensic accountants, tax accountants, information technology accountants, as well as many other specific niches of specialized expertise. Likewise, the medical profession continues to fragment into hundreds, if not thousands, of sub-specialties. While a family doctor could at one time handle just about everything, today you are more likely than ever to be sent to a specialist for anything but the most mundane type of medical issue.

Every profession, every career, and every job is being sliced and diced into multiple sub-categories, and it is the role of the association to ensure that its members are provided the support needed to help smooth such a transition. The education to specialize at the right time with the right skills.

- it leads to an increased need for “multi-skilling”

At the same time that we are witnessing ever increasing career specialization, we are also finding a need within many professions for people to take on multiple different roles. While some individuals find that their chosen profession is undergoing a constant evolution into multiple specialties, others are finding that they must master multiple different specialties. They must be able to take on a wider variety of roles and responsibilities, and are expected to pick up an ever-increasing number of new skills.

- a demand for “just in time skills”

One of the major impacts of our world today is that the rate of change has become nothing less than dramatic, with the result that people are now expected to be able to master new topics and issues at the drop of a hat. This means that association executives must be prepared to provide their members with the capability for rapid knowledge advance when circumstances warrant.

Nowhere was this more evident than with the emergence of SARS. Health care professionals discovered that they needed to quickly learn about a wide variety of issues. Many medical associations found themselves scrambling to put together educational conferences that focused on the many different aspects of SARS, ranging from medical education, to crisis management to issues of public safety and education. We have never seen a medical world evolve from having literally no information about this new disease, to a situation in which it is estimated that the collected global information available on SARS alone exceeds the extent of global medical knowledge that existed in 1965.

Expect this type of knowledge demand to become more frequent in the future, and prepare for it accordingly. A world of rapid knowledge advance implies that a greater number of people will be expected to learn instantly about new topics, issues, products or strategies.

- a shift from tactical to strategic skills

The issue for many associations is that as the world of relentless change unfolds around them, they might not. Hence, many associations need to take a more aggressive role in demonstrating the value, benefit, and criticality of the function provided to association members.

This involves providing the membership with the guidance that helps them to make a migration from providing a very tactical function, to a role that is far more strategic. By doing so, they can clearer perspective of their role and value to the organization.

With rapid growth in knowledge, it is critical that associations continue to focus on ongoing skills upgrading, training, as well as providing strategic insight and motivation to their members to cope with incessant change.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a well known futurist, trends & innovation expert, who frequently advises organizations on a wide variety of issues. A frequent keynote speaker and seminar leader, he is also a popular columnist, having written through the years for the Globe & Mail, National Post, Marketing Magazine and many other publications. Additional information can be found at www.jimcarroll.com. This article can be distributed /reprinted in your own newsletter or publication. Contact Jim Carroll for details.



CANADIAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES
SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DES DIRECTEURS D'ASSOCIATION

© Copyright 2003 Canadian Society of Association Executives